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THE ROLE OF UNIVERSITY RESOURCE ECONOMISTS

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The Role of University Resource Economists:
Implications for Teaching

Discussant

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My colleagues have ably expounded on the research and extension functions of natural resource economists at contemporary land grant institutions. Little has been said, however, about a mission of land grant institutions that is preeminent in public perceptions: teaching. I content that our role as teachers is what is special about all that we do: basic and applied research, public service, and classroom instruction.

By teaching, I mean enlightening clients about concepts and thought processes that help them to organize information and think problems through. Answers to specific problems are secondary outcomes of teaching.

University faculty have a comparative advantage in teaching, relative to their government or private sector counterparts. This advantage derives from three sources: our ready access to curious intellects; the freedom we have to explore ideas that may not be familiar, commercially oriented, or politically popular; and our greater ability to remain objective than our commercial or political peers, which adds credibility to our teaching.

We can take advantage of our comparative advantage in all of our roles. The classroom setting is specially designed for this purpose, but it is not the only forum in which we are looked to as teachers. In research and public service as well, some of

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our most important contributions involve helping others think through problems or think about opportunities. The aims of basic academic research are conceptual and analytical breakthroughs that may not answer specific problems, but help people think about many problems. Applied academic research teaches how to use concepts and analytical techniques in new ways or identifies new problems. Academic extenders help clients identify and understand innovative ways of dealing with problems.

To take advantage of our comparative strength, we must be effective communicators. It is appropriate that success in communicating insights to others weighs heavily in academic evaluations. We must also be liberal thinkers. A very important role of teachers, even teachers of professionals, is to reveal ideas and methods that challenge conventional wisdom. We must strive to avoid intellectual hindsight or stagnation.

In addition to our comparative advantage in teaching, university faculty have a unique teaching mission. We are not alone in doing basic or applied research or in advising public or private clients, but we are alone in fostering ideas that may not meet short-term tests of profitability or political expedience. Moreover, at public universities, epitomized in the land grant institutions, these ideas are offered with fewer strings concerning the ability to pay or deliver votes than is the case with our counterparts in commerce and government. Finally, we can more easily afford objectivity. The result is that we have messages to offer that are not duplicated by other sectors in society. The extent to which our messages are understood and appreciated depends in large measure on our success as teachers.

The preceding remarks apply to university faculty generally. What is special about natural resource economists in the land grant system? Here, I find several comments made in the companion papers to be helpful. Howard Ottoson and Jim Hildreth stress that the Morrill, Hatch, and Smith-Lever acts were designed to make higher education more "accessible" and foster research on "practical" problems. The difficulty of defining work that has "practical" consequences is evident in the papers by Arlo Biere and Jay Leitch. However, I think it undisputable that the obligation to make our work accessible places on us a special burden to combine teaching with our research and service roles.

In all the companion papers, there is recognition that, among economists, natural resource specialists must be especially concerned with public policies. I agree with Richard Barrows and Lawrence Libby when they observe that natural resource economists should be particularly alert to processes of value formation and welfare trade-offs. This has implications for our teaching functions. First, we may be well-qualified to help our fellow economists understand and appreciate some important contributions and limitations of economics in the policy domain. Second, perhaps more than in many other specialties, public decision makers are natural clients for much of the information we have to share.

In summary, university faculty have a comparative advantage and unique mission in teaching. Teaching is a vital dimension of our research and public service activities as well as the focus

of our classroom work. Faculty of land grant universities have a special responsibility to make their work accessible, and this underscores the importance of guiding others to new ways of thinking. Finally, natural resource economists can help other economists, as well as the public decision makers, to understand relationships between economic knowledge and social values.

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